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ABSTRACT

Designed to help children identify the racial stereotypes that occur in the content and illustrations of some children's books, this lesson plan presents a list of evaluative criteria and applies these standards to two contrasting short stories. The plan concentrates on the child's reaction to character development in both stories and includes discussion questions, activities, small group discussions, and a list of 11 thought questions intended for discussion and writing assignments. The texts of the two short stories are included. (MAI)

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A LESSON PLAN TO HELP CHILDREN IDENTIFY RACIAL STEREOTYPES

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> The solution is not to "ban all books that present a stereotyped image". We need instead to take positive action; we need to teach children to recognize stereotypes for themselves.... (Tiedt 1979,p.475).

Stereotyping is a common problem in children's books and is often reflected in illustrations and content; but what may be even more harmful is the fact that it exists in more subtle ways such as the omission of a certain group from content and/or illustrations. The concern of many teachers is combatting the kind of stereotypes that develop negative attitudes in one group of children while eroding the self-respect of another.

Children often have to be taught how to look before they can see, and they can be taught to recognize racial stereotypes in literature. One effective way is to involve them in establishing evaluative criteria and judging books in accordance with the criteria. The suggested plan that follows may be used for this purpose.

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Definition

A stereotype is a standard mental picture of a group of people and represents oversimplified opinions and affective attitudes. Stereotypes are often false and can not be applied to indivisual members of the group. (Rollins 1967, p. xii).

Common black stereotypes are: oversized feet and toes, thick curled-up lips, bulging white eyes, superstition, subservience, an ever-present grin, and an ever-lasting appetite for watermellon.

Criteria for Judging Racial Stereotypes in Books About Blacks

Does the book or story avoid:

1. Setting up a patronizing, paternalistic, or condescending tone?
2. Alienating groups and stereotyping characters?
3. Creating feelings of superiority or inferiority in the minds of young readers?
4. Developing its plot (objectives)at the expense of black characters?

Other Measures

1. Are clothing and behavior demeaning to the black characters?
2. Is dialect spoken only by the black characters?
3. Who has which roles? Do black characters remain in the background or do they play an important, "respectable" part in the story?
4. Are the problems solved by white characters(Are blacks the problem?)or do black characters aid in finding solutions?
5. How are black characters shown in relation to white characters and vice versa? Is either group placed in a superior or inferior role?

6. Do the illustrations look like real black people, or do they look like whites in black face or blacks with exaggerated features?

Note: It is suggested that teachers and students together establish a list of criteria similar to the above list and then use the criteria as standards to evaluate books for racial stereotypes.

Applying the Technique

Behavioral Objectives

Students will be able to:

List or verbalize several black stereotypes as exemplified in the story "A Trainful of Strangers".

Contrast, by telling the difference between the treatment of characters in "A Trainful of Strangers" and Gabrielle and Selena.

"A Trainful of Strangers" was told through the thoughts of ten-year-old Susan, who was accompanying her twelve-year-old brother, Hal to see a T.V. show "Science Searchlight" in down town New York City. Several people had entered the subway train about the same time as Susan and Hal,but they had only received Susan's passing attention. "At 125th two Negro boys got on. They wore old dirty dungarees, the kind that Hal might wear to play ball in, but their jackets--Hal would never have worn either of those jackets, anywhere, any time. ...Underprivileged, thought Susan." (Hull 1972, 246).

The train had a power failure during which time it was revealed that most of the children on the train had accepted free tickets to the T.V. show; the two black boys had the same opportunity but were

not interested enough to do so. These two black children from Harlem were the only characters who spoke dialect, the only characters who became a part of the problem, and the only characters who were unacceptable. Throughout the story Susan had hostile thoughts about the black boys and considered them to be disadvantaged, intrusive, hoodlums, outsiders, gangsters, and delinquents. Although she could not see the faces of speakers during the blackout, she attributed all the "intelligent remarks" to whites or the neat-looking boy from Mt. Vernon. When the lights came on in the train she thought,"It was hard to believe the black boys had ever been a part of the general conversation."

Discussion Questions and Activities

First, read the story to the children and then you may ask if the story failed to live up to any of the criteria established by the group. It might be well to evaluate the story on one criterion at a time and list children's responses on the board. Children can identify with other children(especially American Children)and the analysis of this short story should be fairly easy for them.

Small-Group Work

Divide the class into small groups and let each group discuss the story and then evaluate it on any two or three criteria not already covered. When groups have finished their analyses and written their conclusions, have them share their decisions with the entire class. Encourage questions and contributions from other class members.

Thought Questions for Discussing and Writing

1. Are people who wear shabby-looking clothes always disadvantaged? (Consider: Could the habit of labeling people"disadvantaged" because they do not always wear fine clothes in public be considered stereotypical thinking?)
2. You probably noticed that no one spoke dialect in the story except the two black boys from Harlem. Why do you think the author made only these two boys speak dialect?
3. Do you think Susan felt that she and Hal were better than the two black boys from Harlem? What makes you think so?
4. Did Hal feel the same way about the boys? How do you know?
5. Do white people and black people from the same geographical region speak a similar (language)dialect?
   (Consider: Ethnic group, clothing, and speech: What effect should these have upon a person's right to be respected?)
6. Susan referred to the two black boys as juvenile delinquents, gangsters, hoodlums, and intruders. What made her think of the boys in this way when she knew absolutely nothing about them?
7. Do stories of this type make people of different groups feel more friendly or less friendly toward each other? Which would be better?
8. Why did Susan think that the "intelligent remarks"(made during the blackout)were made by "that girl with stringy black hair and that neat-looking Negro boy"?
9. How do you think the author of this story may have felt about black people? What makes you think so?

10. Rewrite the story so that it will show more respect for certain characters.

11. Rewrite the story from the point of view of the two black boys.

Gabrielle and Selena

Gabrielle and Selena, both eight years old, had been best friends most of their lives and neither of them could remember a time when they had not been together. Gabrielle had long, blondish hair and her hazel eyes were gray and green. Although she was often quiet and thoughtful she was not always quiet. Selena had short, black hair that gathered in tight curls. Her large brown eyes looked like a bowl made of dark wood and filled with rain water. One day the girls decided to exchange places and each started "home"for dinner.

"Good-bye Gabrielle. Have fun at my house. I mean your house."

" Good-bye Selena. Don't forget to feed my cat. I mean your cat."

Although the four parents played along with the girls' trick, Selena and Gabrielle had miserable times pretending to enjoy each other's "favorite dish"--turnips for "Selena" and omlet for "Gabrielle". Soon, playing the other girl's role got to be too difficult for both girls and each decided to return to her real home. When they met in the moonlight half-way between homes, they discovered that their parents had also played a joke on them by serving each of the girl's most-hated food as the "favorite dish".

Applying the Technique

Use any motivation you choose, but it is a good idea to read the book aloud to the children. Use the same initial activities for Gabrielle and Selena that you used for "A Trainful of Strangers".

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Did you feel differently about the characters in this book than you felt about Susan and Hal? Why or in what ways?
2. Does this book create a good or bad feeling between races? Is this a strong or weak point for this book? Why?
3. The author of this story handled both girls(races)in the same manner, that is, he made both girls likeable and respected by each other. Do you think this author felt the same way about black people as the author of "A Trainful of Strangers"? Explain.
4. Do you think either of the girls felt that she was better or smarter than the other? Why do you think as you do?

The questions have been offered to promote discussion and there need not be any predetermined "right" or "wrong" answers to any of them. The goal is to encourage children to read more critically, recognize racial stereotypes, and therefore, reject information which they know from experience to be incorrect. It is often hard to find books that are totally free from both racism and sexism. This sometimes makes it possible or necessary to use the same book for two different purposes: one, as an example of sex stereotypes and two, as an example of a racial-free story, as in the case of Gabrielle and Selena.

Many educators and organizations are especially concerned about the negative effects of racial stereotypes in children's books and most publishers have issued guidelines to combat these effects. But teaching children how to deal with stereotypes may be our best weapon yet.

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